

US-India Relations And The Coming Changes In Afghanistan – Analysis

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May 11, 2012

India has set itself on a clear course for political and economic influence in Asia. But it has quickly realized that its appetite has the potential to lead it into a clash with the United States.

There is a major sore spot in the Obama administration's Asia "pivotal policy," and it is likely to affect Washington's relations with India. The United States has decided to extricate itself from the armed conflicts (Iraq and Afghanistan) in the Greater Middle East so as to redirect its attention to East Asia where, in the words of President Obama, "the action is going to be" in the future.

Strengthening the U.S. strategic position in East Asia, deemed necessary to counterbalance China's ascendancy role in that region, will require closer cooperation between the United States and India. However, the rapid U.S. and allied troop drawdown and eventual withdrawal from Afghanistan will actually increase friction between Washington and New Delhi; the process can potentially steer the relationship in the opposite direction, with dire consequences.



India - United States Relations

In January 2012 the Pentagon released a document called Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense. The specific mention of India in the document is quite relevant: "The United States is also investing in a long term strategic partnership with India to support its ability to serve as a regional economic anchor and provider of security in the broader Indian Ocean region." Both President Obama and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, during trips to India in November 2010 and the previous summer respectively, have urged New Delhi to pursue a more assertive strategic policy in East Asia. Clinton reiterated the importance of such an engagement on India's part during her May 7, trip to New Delhi.

One of the less trumpeted news stories of the past year is how India has begun to be more active in East Asia, a move designed to meet Washington's demands. For instance, despite China's warnings, India has announced that it reserves the right to explore the hydrocarbon deposits off the coast of

Vietnam, a gesture that can only add a new layer of complexity to an existing dispute over who controls the South China Sea. India is also working to strengthen defense and economic ties with Japan, as demonstrated during the apparently very productive visit of Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda to New Delhi in December 2011. It also consolidated security relations with Vietnam and Australia, and shored up its influence in Burma at the expense of China.

Washington and New Delhi now hold regular policy consultations on Asia-Pacific issues and in November 2011 a trilateral security dialogue involving the U.S., India and Japan was launched. It also appears that the rebirth of the four-way security cooperation between the United States, Japan, India and Australia, which flourished briefly in 2006-07, is under discussion. The expansion of Chinese power and ambition has manifestly persuaded New Delhi to establish closer links with the United States, though this process is unlikely to be smooth and fast moving, as many American diplomats would want.

There will be adverse effects for Indian security when the U.S. pulls back its troops from Afghanistan. Key differences are likely to spring up between Washington and New Delhi as to how to bring about a political endgame in that country. In the search for an exit strategy, Washington will probably not be too preoccupied about the exact details of the political system it leaves in place in Afghanistan, nor the ability of the government in Kabul to maintain it over the long term. India, which has developed deep links with the government of Hamid Karzai, will be compelled to intensively observe how the strategic terrain is transformed to its disadvantage.

India's security interests in Afghanistan lie in the fact that any government in Kabul has to serve as a bastion against Pakistan and act as a gateway for consolidating trade and energy ties with Central Asia, especially Turkmenistan. The achievement of these two goals would be undermined if Islamabad gained a central role in shaping a political settlement in Afghanistan or if a Taliban-dominated government were to take power.

Two questions are paramount for India: How committed the United States will be to the survival of the Karzai regime? How important India's interests will be in Washington's accommodation with the Taliban?

Ostensibly, America's staying power and resolve in the region is already on the wane. The security situation is likely to worsen once the US troops are brought home in 2014. President Obama announced back in the summer of 2011 that the current U.S. forces will be pulled out of direct combat operations and only a small contingent of military experts will remain in Afghanistan to train the police and military. The National Security Agency (NSA) and other American intelligence entities have reportedly made pessimistic estimates about the prospects of conducting an effective Afghanistan withdrawal. India is concerned that this will bring about unfortunate military and security consequences.

Obama has assured Karzai that the United States will help Afghanistan to "move from an economy shaped by war to one that can sustain a lasting peace." However, this is easier said than done, as reports by the IMF and World Bank have repeatedly indicated. Moreover, a recent report by staff of the U.S. Senate Foreign Affairs Committee concluded that the hugely expensive U.S. attempt at nation-building in Afghanistan has largely failed. The Committee further warned that the country has become overly dependent on foreign military expenditure and development assistance. As the end of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) is nearing, the flow of these funds will dry up, leading in all probability to an economic depression and other unintended outcomes.

Meanwhile, the U.S. withdrawal will further transform U.S.-Pakistan relations from a broad, however dysfunctional, security partnership to a narrower, more or less sporadic one. Islamabad will become less willing to exert its influence on the Taliban and other armed groups to support U.S. objectives in Afghanistan. In addition, the higher transit fees likely to be charged for the transportation of U.S. military supplies through Pakistan will further weaken the Obama administration's resolve to stay the course in Afghanistan.

Decision-makers in New Delhi are expecting objectionable fallout after the U.S. involvement winds down. Consequently, India is likely to seek rapprochement with Iran, whose interests in Afghanistan are quite similar. The two countries may even revive the cooperation they enjoyed during the 1990s, when they provided critical support to non-Pashtun militias in their battles with the Taliban regime. In some quarters there are rumors that the old Northern Alliance is being reconstituted. India's "cozying up" with Iran will make the U.S. grumble, but the geopolitics of the region leaves New Delhi with few other options.

Growing U.S.-India cooperation in East Asia and emerging disagreements about the future Afghan political landscape are two factors that will most certainly create a conflicting dynamic in the relations between Washington and New Delhi. They will have trade and security consequences for a wide range of players and stakeholders in South and East Asia.

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